Overcoming Anonymity: The Use of Autobiography in the Works Of Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte

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INTRODUCTION

A majority of women in nineteenth-century England lived anonymous existences. With only the identification of "Mrs. So-and-so" or "the daughter of so-and-so," they were merely fixtures of the house, like furniture, meant to serve a domestic purpose in silence. Their education furnished them with only a few basic skills that would potentially attract a husband; beyond this, the male population in authority saw no reason to expand their minds. Nonetheless, women were beginning to realize that this anonymous existence was stifling and inaccurate. They desired speech – not mindless chatter of whimsy and fairy tales, rather real expressions of thought given by a strong voice to an appreciative audience. For some, this essential outlet appeared in the literary world.

Two such women whose voices reached the ears of the public were Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Through their many novels, Austen and Brontë tested the boundaries of their society in order to express and identify themselves. With their varied depictions of women and the domestic sphere, they attempted to eliminate the anonymity of women and to help them regain their real identities. Austen's and Brontë's characters emerged as complicated, intriguing women, not simply guided by flighty emotions, rather with depth of thought based on knowledge, discernment, and experience.

Novelists such as Austen and Brontë provided a great service to the women of their time. Suddenly, women could find true representations of themselves within literature. Not only were their responsibilities in roles such as homemaker, teacher, and governess recognized, but also their importance as authentic individuals, as strong

functioning women. While they had been conditioned by society to find themselves husbands, they could also question such the true value of such conventions as the read about women suffering in their marriages. At last, the female audience could encounter in popular literature women who had a genuine frustration and desire to express their thoughts. No longer were the views of all women silenced, or interpreted through the male perspective.

While Austen and Brontë bestowed hope on much of the reading public through their novels, they also found expression of their own voices. By integrating autobiographical elements into their female characters, these women gave meaning to their own experiences. Although subjected to the restrictions of a patriarchal society, they discovered the meaning of exposing the inequality of their lives; writing novels gave them this opportunity.

Austen's novels are autobiographical particularly in their social commentary. Though her characters are quite distinct from herself in their everyday experiences, their reactions to, opinions of, and frustrations with societal demands reflect her own discomfort. Austen's novels become a vehicle for her own expression, a social commentary, a criticism of the age in which she lived. In her written works, she is extremely aware of her audience, careful not to openly describe her cultural dissatisfaction in a radical and brash manner. Through subtle satire and suggestive words, Austen provokes and connects with her audience, so that with this skilful style, she articulates her personal concerns along with the conflicts of many of the women around her.

Brontë's use of autobiography is more overt than that of her predecessor. While Austen's characters are autobiographical in their thoughts, Brontë's are additionally autobiographical in their experiences. She takes numerous events from her own life and creatively twists them into pieces of creative writing in almost a catharsis of her own existence. Therefore, the events in her novels are fictional, yet they have their foundations in reality. This, too, serves a double purpose for the audience and the author. While the reader can relate to the real-life experiences and emotions of the characters, Brontë is able to make sense of her own life. Though such personal recreation is surely challenging, it renders meaning and offers support for Brontë. By relating her most troubling and private struggles, she is able to work through them and come to terms with her concerns. Additionally, Brontë addresses the sources of such issues, which connect to the social pressures of the world around her. Such expression surely benefits both reader and author.

Autobiography can be viewed in many lights. But while the precise recording of events may lack a certain amount of creative thought, weaving such real occurrences and opinions into the realm of fiction presents a distinct challenge. James Olney explains, "Autobiography is both the simplest of literary enterprises and the commonest. Anybody who can write a sentence or even speak into a tape recorder or to a ghostwriter can do it; yet viewed in a certain light it might fairly be seen as a very daring, even foolhardy, undertaking – a bold rush into an area where angels might well fear to tread" (Olney 3). Both Austen and Brontë faced the challenge of merging the reality that they wished to critique into the identities of their characters. They gave their characters complex voices that reflected the broad scope of the tradition and their own innermost feelings and ideas,

rather than voices that merely served the purpose of each author; by identifying themselves within their characters, while maintaining the authenticity of these characters, both women succeed in telling profound stories about the mundane and exceptional elements of life. In this effort, Austen and Brontë impart their humanity to their characters, strengthening, not sacrificing, their very souls.

In seeking out autobiographical elements within novels, it is important to distinguish between subjectivity and autobiography. Olney notes, "there arises the temptation . . . to argue not only that autobiography exists but that it *alone* exists – that all writing that aspires to be literature is autobiography and nothing else" (Olney 4). It is true that no author can write without subjectivity. From the framing of the narrative, to character choice, to subject matter, the very act of creation reflects the creator. Yet, there is a difference between this and autobiography. In their novels, Austen and Brontë did not simply create according to their tastes, as subjective beings influenced by their own experiences. Instead, they directly chose to depict a part of themselves through their characters. It was this deliberate choice to include themselves in their novels that altered their writing from mere subjectivity to actual autobiography.

Through the autobiographical elements within their female characters, Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë were able to reflect on their own opinions and experiences and evaluate the opinions of their society. While Austen used autobiography to voice her societal frustrations, Brontë employed autobiography primarily as a source of catharsis. Without preaching or moralizing, Austen noted the burdens that her society placed upon women, using both satire and sincerity. Brontë worked through and came to terms with her own struggles by depicting them in her novels, emphasizing the dilemma of living in

a patriarchal society. For both women, writing became a necessary outlet to express conflicted emotion. In a time when women's speech was easily disregarded, literature served as an important tool for communicating the thoughts and ideas of women. Additionally, while little of the domestic sphere and women's roles within it had been captured and collected in historical books, fiction served as a critical lens into the value of the woman in her time. Therefore, the novels of such writers as Austen and Brontë have developed a universal and timeless significance.

The following chapters are an examination of four nineteenth century novels: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*and *Emma* and Charlotte Brontë's*Shirley* and *Villette*. Each of these four novels contains multiple autobiographical elements that have a critical role in serving the needs of its author. These connections and their importance can enrich an understanding of the motives and styles of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë.

CHAPTER 1

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

In 1796, Jane Austen begins to write what will one day be her most widely read and recognized novel. Though titled *First Impressions*, it will be fifteen years before Austen makes any impression on the reading public. In 1813, at the age of 37, Austen publishes this, her second novel, under its new title, *Pride and Prejudice*. Printed two years after *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* solidifies Austen's reputation as a gifted and insightful author and facilitates the great success that is to come for the writer (Cecil 162).

Between the years 1796 and 1799, Austen completes her first three novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey* (Halperin 58). These novels establish the subject matter that is to pervade all of Austen's works; she proves herself to be concerned with the domestic sphere and the characteristics and relationships of the people found within it. Like many authors, Austen chooses to write about what is familiar to her. In *A Portrait of Jane Austen*, David Cecil explains,

> Her view of human nature was limited in the first place by her circumstances: she wrote about men and women as she herself had known them. Her view was further limited by her sex, by the fact that she only saw as much of humanity as was visible to a lady, and this when a lady's view was narrowly confined by convention, so that the only people she ever knew well belonged to her class and lived in her neighborhood (Cecil 144).

He continues that she focuses on what interested her within these circumstances. He writes, "For Austen, this meant life in its private aspects; she was stirred to portray men and women only in relation to their family and friends and social acquaintances" (Cecil 144).

Austen's passion for the private sphere is quite evident in *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel contains a variety of distinct characters, each of whom subscribes to a certain belief system regarding marriage, class and other social conventions. On close reading of the novel, it becomes clear that Austen has employed her acute perception of the behaviors and idiosyncrasies of the human race. While her characters possess strengths and flaws that are universal throughout all times and places, they grapple with issues that are very contemporary to eighteenth and nineteenth-century England. Austen's dedication to such concerns depicts the personal nature of her writing. She places herself in the time and atmosphere with which she is familiar and comfortable and then attempts to portray this environment with both appreciation and frustration. *Pride and Prejudice*, like all of her novels, addresses these individual concerns.

While *Pride and Prejudice* is a very personal account of Austen's outlook on her life, it does not illustrate Austen's life in an autobiographical manner. Austen does not replicate the events of her life in the novel, nor does one character share in all of her major experiences. Cecil writes about Austen, "She never tells a story in the first person, she cannot be identified with any of her heroines and, so far as we know, no incident or character in her book is drawn direct from life" (Cecil 10-11). While it is true that the events and characters in *Pride and Prejudice* are purely fictional, it is erroneous to suggest that Austen cannot be identified with any of her female characters. Yes, the novel's heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, surely has different experiences than Jane Austen. Their parents, siblings, acquaintances, and life events are quite distinct. But, Austen's voice is undeniably present in Elizabeth. By creating a character who shares her gender, class, era, and location, Austen is able to look at the world and reconstruct it through

Elizabeth's eyes. As she meets the same people and reacts in the same way as would her author, Elizabeth Bennet gives Austen the opportunity to express her deepest emotions and opinions of her own society for all readers to experience. That realization, surely, adds an element of autobiography to Austen's major female characters.

Jane Austen and Elizabeth Bennet live in a society marked with hierarchy and rigid social conventions. Born on December 16, 1775, Austen joins English society during the reign of King George III. George III greatly helps in unifying the country, particularly through his efforts to improve England's roads. Turnpikes and the stagecoach create "a new era of easier travel" that permit "men and ideas to move rapidly between London and the provinces" (Webb 103). Though Austen rarely leaves her home in the English countryside, the increasing ease of travel and improving communication facilitate her novels' accessibility beyond her limited physical boundaries.

During George's reign of over 59 years, the nation sees many other changes, as well. By the 1760s, the people begin to reject the "rationality and resolute classicism" of generations before too "cold and formal" (Webb 122). The late eighteenth century sees the rise of a "cult of sensibility," particularly depicted in its novels. "For a generation or more, strong men wept openly and embraced each other; ladies fainted and suffered from 'excessive sensibilities' " (Webb 122). Gothic novels, filled with "mystery, passion, and horror in medieval settings," also become popular. By the 1790s, when Austen begins to produce her works, there is a cultural reformation, as the Evangelical movement takes hold within the Church of England. This movement, which "emphasized the sense of sin, the weakness of man without God, the experience of conversion, and dedication to service," introduces a reformation of manners, in which English society rejects many

common vices for a more prudent way of life (Webb 125). After the turmoil of the American and French Revolutions, England chooses to reaffirm its values, seen quite dramatically in a resurgence of church attendance (Webb 127).

Therefore, it is in this atmosphere of moral growth and rebirth that Jane Austen composes her novels. Though Austen does not live to see the reign of Queen Victoria, Austen's life and characters are greatly influenced by the values and culture of what England later regards as Victorianism. In *Victorian People and Ideas*, Richard D. Altick explains,

> The tastes and taboos of Victorian "prudery" and "respectability," a decalogue consisting largely of Thou shalt *nots*, began some time before the century did, in a gathering reaction against post-Augustan laxity of speech and behavior. Victorianism, in the popular sense of strict moral conduct and ethical obscurantism, existed in the court of George III, which was notorious among the freer spirits of the late eighteenth century for its oppressive virtue and sheer dullness (Altick 8-9).

Victorian cultural values, which particularly restrict the women of the nineteenth century, are a vital part of Austen's existence.

As Austen's heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet feels similarly the stifling effects of this culture. By making Elizabeth a member of the gentry, Austen expresses her own frustrations with the label. Cecil writes, "Austen was . . . a child of the gentry . . . The gentry were seldom as rich as were the great nobles of the day . . . But for the most part, they were comfortable enough; and, as much as the nobles, they were members of the ancient established ruling classes of England" (Cecil 11-12). The gentry rank just below the aristocracy in the hierarchy of England. The aristocracy is of "landowning interest" and is composed of wealthy families with name and blood connections. Through intermarriage and politics, they are able to maintain an elevated

status. The gentry enjoy many of the aristocracy's privileges and are often connected to them through birth and marriage. This group includes any younger sons who have lost the family fortune through the laws of primogeniture, baronets with hereditary knighthoods, and gentlemen. They are shown loyalty by the lower classes, such as the middle class of merchants, shopkeepers, and professionals, the working class of field and factory laborers and menial domestic servants, and the peasants who are tied to the land (Altick, 20-34).

The Bennets' status in this hierarchy is of particular importance throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. As the novel begins, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife," Austen satirically presents its pervading topic: marriage and its inherent inequalities (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 231). On hearing of the arrival of Charles Bingley, the new tenant at Netherfield Park, Mrs. Bennet is overjoyed at the prospect of marrying one of her daughters to the wealthy man. She tells her husband excitedly, "A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 231). With this conversation begins the Bennets' interest in Bingley, which eventually leads to a relationship between Jane Bennet and Bingley, as well as a romance linking Bingley's friend Fitzwilliam Darcy with Elizabeth.

Mrs. Bennet wishes desperately to marry off her five daughters because the family belongs to the class of the gentry. The Bennets' lack of wealth and property serve as the source of their desperation. They cannot even claim their house as their own, as their cousin, Mr. William Collins will inherit the Longbourn estate upon the death of Mr. Bennet. Because of this unfortunate situation, Collins assumes that Elizabeth will be

delighted at the opportunity of marrying him and thereby maintaining the Bennets' residence at Longbourn. When she rejects his offer, he reminds her of her class, stating,

> My situation in life, my connections with the family of de Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into further consideration, that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 297).

While Collins is hardly a man of wisdom, his analysis of Elizabeth's place in life is somewhat accurate. Her family's class prevents her from being a desirable commodity to many whom she might wish to marry. Therefore, her predicament is aptly named by Austen in Collins' smug statement. For a member of the aristocracy, a marriage with Elizabeth would involve marrying beneath oneself, and for another member of the gentry, she offers little opportunity for growth. Collins recognizes that within their society, her good looks and manners cannot substitute for her financial inadequacy. He also arrogantly notes that for many other women in Elizabeth's social situation, his proposal would be considered an extraordinary prospect. Austen's disdain for such inequality in her world comes through in the perverse responses of her characters, and the text becomes a well-mannered criticism.

Collins' point is proven several times within *Pride and Prejudice* Earlier in the novel, on meeting Jane Bennet, Bingley's sister is quite taken with her charms. But, when discussing her as a possible wife for her brother, she admits, "with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it." Darcy echoes her aristocratic sentiments, stating that the Bennet daughters' lower family connections "materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the

world" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 251). The social class that the Bennets hold encourages both Bingley and Darcy to restrain their feelings for Jane and Elizabeth, respectively. This representation is a shrewd, yet particularly polite, expression of Austen's disillusionment with the age in which she lives.

When Darcy finally rejects the expectations of his society and proposes to Elizabeth, his family is enraged. His aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, becomes particularly angry, as she wishes her wealthy nephew to marry her daughter and thereby keep the family's money within the family. Her insulting words to Elizabeth show her disregard for "a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 444). Elizabeth defends herself, stating, "He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter: so far we are equal" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 445). Yet Lady Catherine immediately brings attention to the fact that Elizabeth's mother has no important familial connections. As a woman with no fortune and dubious maternal connections, Elizabeth cannot destroy the stigma attached to her. Her father is a gentleman, who need not work for a living, and her family maintains a proper living, but, according to custom, this is not enough to make her worthy for a man as wealthy and renowned as Darcy. Even Austen cannot sustain Elizabeth's assertion of equality, as she forces her character to submit to the propriety of the day.

Though Jane Austen is also member of the gentry, her family's status is slightly higher than that of Elizabeth's family. "On both sides she was descended from well-established respected families of squires and parsons" (Cecil 20). Her father, an orphan by the age of nine, has strong family connections that provide him with an education and

a living as a clergyman in Steventon, as well as Deane, while her mother preserves respectability through her familial connections with a duke and the aristocracy. Both of her parents are well educated (Cecil 20-22). Therefore, while she can relate to Elizabeth in that she too does not inhabit the highest ranks of the social hierarchy, she is a more desirable marriage prospect than her character.

The class structure of England is of great concern to Austen. Even the title of her novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, suggests the preoccupation that she has with social relations among the different classes. As intelligent and heroic women, such as herself and Elizabeth, feel prejudice for something out of their control – the family they were born into, dull and mean-spirited women such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh scrutinize those socially below them with immense pride and condescension. Austen makes obvious her dissatisfaction with this system, as characters such as Collins and Lady Catherine are presented as foolish and bigoted, while the wealthy, aristocratic Darcy is only redeemed by embracing a member of the gentry and regretting his former behavior. In this style, Austen uses her novel to display the folly of the social hierarchy that plagues her.

While Austen's connections are slightly more desirable than her characters', their lifestyles are equally modest. Austen's family enjoys a simple living at Steventon, which consists of a humble home, chapel, and rectory. Though charming, the chapel is "as plain and small as a Nonconformist chapel" (Cecil 23). Her mother embraces their rural lifestyle as Cecil explains, "Born and bred a country woman and by nature contented, she threw herself into the duties of the rural and domestic existence in which fate had placed her . . . Any pride she may have felt in her ancestry did not check her from discharging her humbler obligations" (Cecil 22-23). Austen is quite content in her youth

and takes great pleasure in examining literature with her father and comedy and realism with her mother (Cecil 23). This close relationship with her parents lays the foundation for her appreciation for strong writing that reflects the actuality of life and approaches it in a humorous and creative manner.

Though Austen maintains a modest childhood, she takes part in a number of enjoyable activities. "The Austen children grew up able to enter fully into any pleasure offered them by country society . . . the girls embroidered and sketched and played the piano and gossiped agreeably with their neighbours" (Cecil 35). Additionally, Austen is consistently in the presence of those outside her home. With her siblings, she "danced and dined out and took part in amateur theatricals" (Cecil 35). She is exposed to the pleasures of the wealthy, while at the same time her home is a constant reminder that a potential husband could not depend on her for a large fortune. Although Austen is aware that she is not truly a part of the wealthy world that she often enjoys, this exposure proves invaluable in giving her writing a well-roundedness that would otherwise be absent. She is able to depict a variety of social ranks with authenticity because she experiences the lifestyles of each.

As in the fate of her heroine, Austen lives in a society in which marriage is the prescribed goal for a woman. In *The Victorians*, Sir Charles Petrie explains, "The Victorian heroine was an almost standardized product, and her functions were courtship and marriage" (Petrie 199). He continues, "From infancy all girls who were born above the level of poverty had the dream of a successful marriage before their eyes, for by that alone was it possible for a woman to rise in the world" (Petrie 199). Austen has the same social pressures placed on her as Elizabeth. Though shy as a child, upon coming out at

the age of sixteen, Austen enjoys many social outings, such as balls and dinner parties, and has several suitors, though each relationship ends in disappointment. Her first romance with Tom LeFroy ends when his family deems him too poor to marry and sends him back to Ireland (Cecil 76). As in *Pride and Prejudice*, marriage is an opportunity for economic gain, and the LeFroys see little opportunity in the Austens. Austen is uninterested in her second suitor, Samuel Blackall, but he too determines that he cannot afford marriage at the time (Cecil 83-84). Perhaps the greatest love of Austen's life is a clergyman whom she meets in Sidmouth. Her older sister and confidante, Cassandra, believes them to be deeply in love. But, the clergyman is forced to leave Sidmouth and dies suddenly before he can return. Just over a year later, the 21-year-old heir, Harris Bigg-Wither, proposes to Austen. She accepts, but breaks the engagement the following morning (Cecil 97). This experience is exceedingly difficult for Austen, whose courtships do not resume. She never marries.

Though each of Austen's relationships ends abruptly, romance and the symbolism of marriage still pervade the mind of the author. Her dedication to novels that end in marriage appears to be something more than an adherence to the customs of the novel during her time; instead, she weaves her characters together in such a way that celebrates their bond above all, perhaps somewhat idealistically, perhaps somewhat cynically. It is as if Austen's relationship with the clergyman forever remains in her mind, and as she dreams of a union that can never be, she lives vicariously through her many heroines. Though Austen cannot live out her passion for the clergyman, she has known love and she imparts her feelings to her characters.

In 1805, Austen's father dies, leaving the family with very little to support itself. Fortunately, Austen is one of eight children, and her brothers generously support their mother and sisters (Cecil 109). Full of the wit and intelligence of Elizabeth Bennet, Austen has long been writing her own novels privately. Since she has little money, her brothers continue to provide for her. "With her future secure and her leisurely and any idea of marriage dismissed from her mind, she was at least completely free to concentrate on her art" (Cecil 141). By the age of 35, only her family has ever enjoyed the pleasure of reading her works. Between the ages of eleven and eighteen, she had written many comedies and entertaining literature; she had attempted a novel at eighteen, called *Catherine*, but she never completed the endeavor. Now, seventeen years later, Austen revises her three early works, and begins her second trilogy. Between 1811 and 1816, she writes *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* (Halperin 195). Void of any distractions, Austen devotes herself to her writing.

Such an account of her experience evidences the many differences between Jane Austen and Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth marries her true love, while Austen loses hers to death. Elizabeth has no vocation beyond the private sphere, while Austen develops a career as a renowned author. Elizabeth's family brings her embarrassment and discomfort, while Austen's brings her solace and joy. Nevertheless, it remains evident that Austen injects a great deal of herself into her novel's heroine. As Elizabeth suffers with the pressure to marry well, particularly in the case of William Collins, Austen, too, struggles with the idea of marriage. As an heir, Harris Bigg-Wither proves to be the inspiration for Collins, yet Austen, like Elizabeth, cannot resign herself to a loveless

marriage. With her love deceased, Austen chooses solitude and finds fulfillment as a writer, drawing upon her powerful imagination.

Because of these experiences, Austen chooses to examine marriage in two ways. As studied before, she explores the challenges of marriage within a class system. Having lost many suitors to lack of a fortune, Austen is greatly aware that wealth plays a role in marriage. She portrays this through the aforementioned courtships of the Bennet sisters. As the novel closes, class barriers have been broken, and the Bennet sisters have found wealthy and willing husbands. Why does Austen allow such an anomaly to occur as wealthy men solicit poor young ladies? Ultimately, Austen proves that she, like Elizabeth, doubts the success of a loveless marriage, as romantic love triumphs and the sisters build relationships based on mutual admiration.

Elizabeth displays her convictions about loveless marriages particularly in her involvement with her cousin, Collins, and her good friend, Charlotte Lucas. Elizabeth rejects Collins' proposal, though financially tempting, because she has no feelings for him. Therefore, she is greatly upset when she learns that her close friend, Charlotte, has accepted the proposal of the very same man. She knows that Charlotte has accepted him because of his many financial benefits for her and her family. Still, with the knowledge that Charlotte does not care deeply for Collins, Elizabeth cannot be at ease. Austen writes, "And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem, was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 308). Elizabeth cannot accept the idea of marriage without affection.

Early in the novel, Charlotte describes her feelings about marriage as more of a game between strangers than a bonding of lovers. She explains to Elizabeth, "We can all *begin* freely – a slight preference is natural enough: but there are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement. In nine cases out of ten a woman had better show *more* affection than she feels" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 242). She speaks of Jane Bennet's courtship with Bingley, saying, "When she is secure of him, there will be leisure for falling in love as much as she chooses" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 242). Elizabeth responds, "Your plan is a good one, where nothing is in question but the desire of being well married; and if I were determined to get a rich husband, or any husband, I dare say I should adopt it" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 243). Elizabeth makes it clear that she believes marriage to be more than a union of wealth. But Charlotte insists, "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance . . . it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 243). Elizabeth replies, "You make me laugh, Charlotte; but it is not sound. You know it is not sound, and that you would never act in this way yourself" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 243). Elizabeth feels certain that her friend is simply repeating the maxims of their societal customs. She does not believe that Charlotte would herself engage in a marriage with someone for whom she hardly cares.

On learning that her friend has chosen to put such beliefs into practice, Elizabeth feels somewhat estranged from her. She notes the change in their correspondence after the marriage. Austen writes, "Elizabeth could never address her without feeling that all the comfort of intimacy was over, and though determined not to slacken as a

correspondent, it was for the sake of what had been, rather than what was" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 319). Elizabeth does not respect Charlotte's decision and therefore loses value in her as a friend.

Because Austen portrays Collins as a foolish man, both through his arrogance to the Bennets and his obsequiousness to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, she clearly depicts the folly in marrying him. His wife will undeniably suffer many years of boredom and exasperation at the hands of her supercilious husband. It is evident to the reader that Austen agrees with Elizabeth in her dubious view of the marriage of Charlotte and Collins. Once more, the views of Austen are depicted in her heroine. In a letter to her niece, Fanny Knight, she warns the girl to only marry her suitor, Mr. Plumtre, if she cares for him. She writes, "I . . . entreat you not to commit yourself farther, & not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection" (Tave 34). Tave explains, "Charlotte is interested in neither the man nor the relationship, only the marriage . . . There is more than enough evidence, elsewhere in Jane Austen and in this novel, to make clear how mistaken Charlotte is in a decision to marry without affection" (Tave 33). Through Elizabeth, Austen shows that a woman can have higher expectations when entering a marriage. She does not directly denounce Charlotte for adhering to custom, but instead challenges the custom itself.

Austen portrays her ideal type of marriage through Elizabeth, as well. For Austen, a worthy husband has more than good manners and a respectable outward appearance. Tave notes this as recognition of one who is truly "amiable" as opposed to one who is only "agreeable." When discussing Mr. Plumtre in a letter to Fanny, Austen

writes, “He gives me the idea of a very amiable young Man, only too diffident to be so agreeable as he might be.” Tave explains that Mr. Plumtre “is lacking in the social manner that would make him complete, but a completeness cannot be expected often, and when there are choices to be made it is always the amiable that is to be chosen” (Tave 23-24). Austen explains what she really values, writing, “above all his character – his uncommonly amiable mind, strict principles, just notions, good habits . . . *All* that really is of first importance” (Tave 24). Austen depicts such beliefs in her portrayal of Darcy. On meeting Darcy, Elizabeth finds him far from agreeable; he is much too proud and somber for her tastes. But, on learning more about him, she realizes that he is truly amiable. He saves her sister, Lydia, from humiliation and wishes only to protect his friends from harm. While he would be improved by a better social manner, his true character is worthy and good. Because of her beliefs about amiability, as stated in her letter to Fanny, Austen gives her heroine a truly amiable husband. Such a relationship would have been necessary were Austen to marry.

While the relationships between marriage and class and marriage and affection dominate the social issues in *Pride and Prejudice,* Austen also takes a close look at the social conventions surrounding femininity. Austen herself grows up in a time marked by severe limitations imposed upon women, in a society that reduces women to the domestic sphere. During the eighteenth century, middle-class women are permitted access to menial occupations, including hairdressing and catering (Altick 50). But, at the turn of the century, Austen witnesses an increase on the restriction of women. Altick explains,

> By the beginning of the nineteenth century the powerful concept of “refinement” prescribed that all women outside the working class abstain from gainful employment except in cases of extreme necessity. It was such cases which resulted in a few Victorian women becoming

> professional writers . . . prejudice against women writers was strong enough to make advisable the adoption of masculine pen names (Altick 51).

Austen is one of the female authors who recognize this prejudice, although she publishes her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, "By a Lady" (Cecil 156). Therefore, while she maintains her privacy, she does not evade prejudice by assuming a male name. Her femininity is an important part of her perspective, particularly considering her subject matter. Though Austen is obsessively secretive about her novels, she does inform her closest relatives of their publications. After the publication of her second novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, her anonymity is fading quickly. She admits, "The truth is that the secret has spread so far as to be scarcely the shadow of a secret now . . . I believe whenever the third appears I shall not even attempt to tell lies about it – I shall rather try to make all the money than all the mystery I can get of it" (Hodge 145).

Austen's success as a female author is perhaps due to her treatment of social conventions. While she pushes the limits of society by asserting herself as a female author of the gentry, she remains within the bounds of propriety. Similarly, her character Elizabeth challenges societal norms without alienating herself from polite society. In "Propriety as a Test of Character: *Pride and Prejudice*," Jane Nardin explains,

> The definition of true propriety which *Pride and Prejudice* offers – to anticipate somewhat – is simply a healthy respect for the conventional rules of social behavior, modified by an understanding that those forms are important, not as ends themselves, but as means of regulating social intercourse, and therefore they need not always be followed slavishly (Nardin 8).

In Elizabeth, Austen confronts the multi-layered meanings within the convention of marriage, whether loveless or solely as a means of financial gain. Yet Elizabeth

maintains her status as a respectable lady, successfully elevating herself socially through her marriage.

Nardin supports her definition of Austen's propriety by referencing Elizabeth's walk to visit Jane while sick at Netherfield (Nardin 9). When further explored, this allusion is particularly valuable. On learning that her sister has fallen ill at Netherfield, Elizabeth feels compelled to check on her status. Austen writes, "Elizabeth, feeling really anxious, was determined to go to her, though the carriage was not to be had; and as she was no horsewoman, walking was her only alternative. She declared her resolution" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 249). Though her mother is shocked at the suggestion, Elizabeth leaves for Netherfield. On arriving there, "her appearance created a great deal of surprise. That she should have walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself, was almost incredible to Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley; and Elizabeth was convinced that they held her in contempt for it" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 249). But, Jane proves to be more ill than she had suggested, and she is overjoyed to receive the care and company of her sister.

During this incident, Elizabeth breaks from the traditional rules of propriety due to her concern for her sister. While she would not normally walk a great distance alone only to arrive at a fine estate "with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise," Elizabeth chooses to do so purely because of extreme nature of the situation (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 249). Without a carriage or horse riding skills, Elizabeth makes use of the only transportation available – her feet. This inclination well defines Austen's view of propriety. Both author and character follow the rules of social behavior, and, interestingly, as does her creator, Elizabeth slightly

challenges these conventions when convenient. She does not reject popular culture, though she is not bound by it either. Both women feel free to decline seemingly desirable marriage proposals; while one woman works as an author, the other travels for miles by foot. They respect their roles as women, yet they subtly redefine the station of women through their assertive decisions. Austen does not directly break the boundaries of her time, rather she seems to push against them, and demand that exceptions be allowed and tolerated. Thereby she maintains the acceptance of a culture that is rather resistant to change, while incurring the admiration of those who recognize both her works and her efforts as a female writer for their revolutionary implications. This ability to provoke her audience while maintaining an air of respectability is perhaps her greatest achievement as an author, as she neither offends nor patronizes her readers with blatant criticism. Her method is one of subtle confrontation.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen delves into a variety of themes and issues that all originate in the private sphere. As she challenges the conventions of her day, such as marriage, class, and gender, her alliance with Elizabeth Bennet is evident. Though each woman has different experiences, they emerge similarly as pioneers in questioning the cultural norms of their time. For this reason, the reader achieves a sense of closeness to Austen, whose personality and opinions emerge under the guise of those of Elizabeth.

CHAPTER 2

Jane Austen's *Emma*

In December of 1815, Jane Austen publishes her fourth novel, *Emma*. Between the years 1811 and 1814, she had published *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*, each of which was extremely successful. By the time *Emma* reaches the reading public, Austen is already an established writer, and is, in fact, so celebrated that the Regent of the United Kingdom requests that *Emma* be dedicated to him.

In 1811, George Augustus Frederick, Prince of Wales, replaces his mentally deranged father as Regent of the United Kingdom (Richardson 7). The Regency then lasts for nine years, until the death of King George III, when the Regent is crowned King George IV (Richardson 142). The Regency is a time of a proliferation of great poetry, as seen in the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Moore, and Shelley, as well as a time of much literary criticism (Richardson 113-132). A great admirer of Austen, the Regent, on learning of her visit to London, invites her to his home. During Austen's visit to Carlton House, the librarian informs her that a set of her novels is in each of the Regent's residences and that she is free to dedicate a novel to His Royal Highness. In response, Austen dedicates *Emma* to the Regent of the United Kingdom, thereby quelling any doubts held by the reading public about her impact on the literary world (Richardson 24).

With her fourth novel, Austen fashions plot twists and characterization in new ways, yet her subject matter remains quite similar to her previous novels. As in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen explores the strengths and limitations of her age, in particular with regard to gender and class. Title character Emma Woodhouse is chiefly notable for her

refusal to marry and her extreme snobbery. As Austen guides Emma through several enlightening experiences, she creates the text as a backdrop for her heroine's coming of age. In a letter to her niece, Anna, Austen writes, "Till the heroine grows up, the fun must be imperfect" (Bradbrook 8), and Emma certainly needs to achieve a level of maturity before she can be a heroine. Though she is wrought with personal flaws, Emma can eventually be redeemed as she encounters foreign customs and ideals.

Emma's character is particularly unique in light of her outlook on marriage, for as a wealthy woman, she finds marriage wholly unnecessary. She explains to her friend, Harriet Smith,

> I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and maybe as sensible and pleasant as anybody else (Austen, *Emma*, 109).

Emma insists that since she can support herself and since she is not in love with any man, there is simply no need for her to marry. She continues, "as for objects of interest, objects for the affections, which is in truth the great point of inferiority, the want of which is really the great evil to be avoided in *not* marrying, I shall be very well off, with all the children of a sister I love so much, to care about" (Austen, *Emma*, 110). Emma feels that the adoration of her father, followed by a loving relationship with her nieces and nephew, will forever satisfy her need for companionship and love.

Emma's radical ideas regarding marriage reflect the limitations of a wife during Austen's time. Once married, a woman "passed from dependence upon parents to submission to a husband" (Petrie 206). From their youth, women are trained to attract men through their accomplishments, such as music, drawing, and a grasp of the French

language (Petrie 200). Families impress the importance of marriage upon their daughters, recognizing that they quickly become a financial drain that can only be stopped through a profitable union. As a result, "most Victorian women accepted almost any sort of marriage that was offered to them" (Petrie 206). Emma sees no reason to live under the watchful eye of a husband for whom she cares nothing, when she can maintain control over her own household, supported by her passive father.

Emma's decision to remain single certainly reflects the reality of Austen's life. Austen publishes *Emma* at the age of forty, after she has dedicated herself to her writing and has abandoned the idea of marriage entirely. Though worthy men have shown great interest in her, Austen, too, resists the idea of a loveless union. She, like Emma, prefers a more solitary life to a life with someone whom she does not regard with love and admiration. Additionally, Austen also finds much companionship in her family. Not only is she extremely close to her sister, Cassandra, she maintains an intimate relationship with her nieces, Fanny and Anna. When describing the life that Emma envisions, Austen clearly uses her own lifestyle as a model. Though marriage is in Emma's future, Austen wants to depict the value of the single life. In *Jane Austen: Emma*, Frank W. Bradbrook explains, "as a spinster, Jane Austen supports the dignity of the unmarried life in Emma's vision of her future" (Bradbrook 24). While the romantic in Austen does not suggest that a solitary life is always preferable, she does want to make clear that a woman who can support herself need not resort to a loveless marriage. Emma's views reject the shame that many people associate with spinsterhood, as Austen attempts to distinguish her own position as one of deliberate choice and personal

satisfaction. Bradbrook describes an intentional connection that Austen makes between herself and Emma,

> Perhaps it is not a mere coincidence that Emma has 'the true hazel eye': J.E. Austen-Leigh says that Jane Austen had 'bright hazel eyes.' Only Jane's family and friends . . . would see the joke. They must have appreciated much more keenly that the present-day reader the element of self-satire in the novel. Jane Austen is both mocking herself and indulging in a wish-fulfillment dream of the marriage that she herself was never to experience and enjoy (Bradbrook 23).

While Austen teasingly notes her own pride about a single life through Emma's naiveté, she also acknowledges her own inclination toward marriage. Though Emma dignifies the role of the spinster, she does eventually marry, thereby living out the greater dream of Austen. Austen hopes to present the worth of a single woman, while also depicting the ultimate joy of a loving union. At twenty-one, Emma is too inexperienced to realize that love might come her way; at forty, Austen recognizes the limitations of a marriage of convenience. Margaret Wye explains, "The novel offers a wide variety of textually instantiated marriages – as well as connections and matches that are proposed, but either never realized or realized later in the novel – to encourage the reader's understanding of the dangers inherent in the institution" (Wye 10). As a woman during a time of great misogyny and patriarchal domination, Austen is all too familiar with such hypocrisy and danger.

While Emma's penchant towards unmarried life is unique for a woman of her time, her character flaws make her even more unique as a heroine. In *Jane Austen's Emma*, Douglas Jefferson notes,

> Jane Austen's most obvious contribution in her characterisation of Emma, is the conception of a heroine with serious defects . . . Emma's errors are caused by ordinary uncomely faults: lack of consideration for others, a

> conceited opinion of her own judgment. She is the first of the distinguished line of great faulty heroines in English fiction (Jefferson 59).

Arnold Kettle takes this one step further, challenging the belief that Emma is a heroine at all. In "Emma," he writes,

> Emma is the heroine of this novel only in the sense that she is its principal character and that it is through her consciousness that the situations are revealed; she is no heroine in the conventional sense. She is not merely spoilt and selfish, she is snobbish and proud, and her snobbery leads her to inflict suffering that might ruin happiness (Kettle 87).

Emma's greatest flaw lies in her preoccupation with class. She views her world through biased social classifications, upon which she conveniently reigns from on high. She feels that her social class puts her in a position to advise – or, more appropriately, control – those socially below her. As a snob and a manipulator, Emma seems to be a strange choice for a heroine, yet the process through which she recognizes her faults and ultimately repents of her poor choices, redeems her character fully.

Austen opens *Emma* with a description of her heroine, writing, "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (Austen, *Emma*, 37). With this portrayal, Austen immediately depicts Emma as a woman with many worldly advantages who has never suffered any hardships or known any want. Although naïve and inexperienced, Emma knows that she is wealthy and good-looking, and this knowledge arms her with the confidence to control others.

Through this depiction of Emma, Austen satirizes the aristocratic class. Dressed in the finest clothes and known by their family names, the wealthiest classes derive confidence from their social arrangement. These superficial characteristics equip them

with the self-assurance to feel that they can dominate those beneath their rank. As with the foolish young woman Emma, they do not realize that their lack of hardship throughout their lives has actually made them weaker than their inferiors. They cannot understand the plight of the poor or the efforts of the middle class. Austen suggests that the power of the rich is founded on arrogance derived solely from birth, which is of no credit to the individuals themselves.

In her own boredom, Emma takes an immediate interest in Harriet Smith due to Harriet's general attractiveness. Austen writes, "Miss Smith was a girl of seventeen whom Emma knew very well by sight and had long felt an interest in, on account of her beauty" (Austen, *Emma*, 53). Additionally, Harriet is young and impressionable; she flatters Emma and admires her as a superior. As Marvin Mudrick writes, "Emma prefers the company of women, more particularly of women whom she can master and direct" (Mudrick, "Irony as Form: *Emma*," 105). Harriet is just this sort of woman. On visiting Emma's home at Hartfield, Harriet greatly admires the beauty and elegance of the estate. Once Emma notes the impression that her home has made on Harriet, she decides that Harriet's appreciation of finer things must be encouraged. Austen writes, "Those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintance she had already formed were unworthy of her. The friends from whom she had just parted, though very good sort of people, must be doing her harm" (Austen, *Emma*, 54). With a mixture of curiosity and conceit, Emma plans to advance the status of Harriet. Austen writes, "*She* would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would inform her opinions and her manners" (Austen, *Emma*, 54).

And with these simplistic and judgmental thoughts, Emma embarks on a task that could only harm her innocent new friend.

Soon after the formation of their friendship, Harriet approaches Emma with important news: Robert Martin, a local farmer, has proposed marriage to her (Austen, *Emma*, 77). Harriet is very excited, as she highly esteems Martin, but Emma immediately discourages the union. Though Emma claims that Harriet must make the decision herself, she clearly influences the girl's choice. For example, when Harriet hesitantly suggests that she refuse Martin, Emma expresses her relief, stating, "Perfectly, perfectly right . . . While you were at all in suspense I kept my feelings to myself, but now that you are so completely decided I have no hesitation in approving" (Austen, *Emma*, 80). Harriet is obviously not "completely decided," but Emma feels that it is her duty to save her friend from a life with a mere farmer. She continues to instill this assertion in her by threatening her, saying, "It would have grieved me to lose your acquaintance, which must have been the consequence of your marrying Mr. Martin . . . I could not have visited Mrs. Robert Martin, of Abbey-Mill Farm" (Austen, *Emma*, 80). Harriet values her friendship with Emma so much that this contention ends any thoughts of her marrying Martin.

Through the interaction of Emma and Harriet, Austen again implies the ignorance prevalent in the aristocracy in regards to the lower classes. In her own arrogance, Emma decides to guide Harriet through life, supposing that her own class status alone could benefit her new friend. Additionally, she does not recognize Harriet's limitations implicit in her social rank. For Harriet, a marriage with Martin would not only be possible socially, it would also be an emotionally satisfying union; Harriet would find comfort

both socially and romantically. Emma assumes that her own position will enable her to help Harriet, while failing to realize the inherent rigidity in the class structure of her time. Austen suggests that as long as the hierarchy exists, social mobility can only be a rare, perhaps disastrous, event.

As the novel continues, though Emma believes her manipulation of her simple-minded friend to be in everyone's best interest, she is quickly proven wrong. As Mr. Knightley, a close friend of the Woodhouses explains at the formation of the friendship, "as for Harriet, I will venture to say that *she* cannot gain by the acquaintance. Hartfield will only put her out of conceit with all the other places she belongs to. She will grow just refined enough to be uncomfortable with those among whom birth and circumstances have placed her home" (Austen, *Emma*, 67). Knightley knows that Harriet is of dubious birth, and therefore she will not be a desirable wife for a member of the upper class. Emma learns this lesson through an unfortunate match-making scheme. Kettle describes Emma's flaw in this design, writing, "She sees human relationships in terms of class snobbery and property qualifications: Harriet, for the sake of social position, she would cheerfully hand over to the wretched Elton and does in fact reduce to a humiliating misery" (Kettle 87). But, Kettle admits, "It is only through her own intimate experiences (which we share) that she comes to a more critical and more fully humane view" (Kettle 87). Emma's foolishness is part of her immaturity, and to be a heroine, she must develop her character.

Confident of her ability to control her world, Emma attempts to forge a romance between Harriet and Mr. Elton, a gentleman. When Elton learns of the plan, he is highly insulted and cries out,

> Never, madam, never, I assure you. *I* think seriously of Miss Smith! Miss Smith is a very good sort of girl; and I should be happy to see her respectably settled. I wish her extremely well; and, no doubt, there are men who might not object to — Every body has their level; but as for myself, I am not, I think, quite so much at a loss. I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith (Austen, *Emma*, 150-151).

Emma is naturally distressed at this news, particularly because she herself suggested Elton to Harriet. This unsuccessful courtship proves to be an early learning experience for the novel's heroine, reinforcing Austen's belief about the difficulties of upward mobility in the social classes.

Though Austen uses Emma as an example for the ignorance of the aristocracy, she also sympathizes with her character for living in a society that has encouraged such a lack of awareness. Furthermore, while there is no evidence that Jane Austen ever plays the role of the matchmaker, Emma's playful character certainly echoes her creator. Austen affirms her attachment to Emma when she states, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (Lodge 11). Lionel Trilling insists, "Of Jane Austen's six great novels, *Emma* is surely the one that is most fully representative of its author" (Trilling 121). Mudrick supports this theory, stating, "Emma is a beautiful and clever girl, with every grace but tenderness. Without it, she exhibits the strong need to dominate, the offhand cruelty, the protective playfulness, the malice of Jane Austen, the candid Jane Austen of the letters" (Mudrick, "Irony as Form: *Emma*," 106). Austen is a woman who enjoys comedy, brutal honesty, and the satire that results, and she is just as willing to look at herself with a critical eye as she is the world around her. Mudrick notes Emma's "fear of commitment," as well as her devotion to honesty (Mudrick, "Irony as Form: *Emma*," 115). Austen is much the same. Her novels, as well as her letters, attack

the customs and limitations of her time indirectly, but quite perceptibly. In her relationships with men, she too displays a fear of commitment in her adherence to the truth; she feels that to marry without love is to base a union on a lie, and she fears being forced into such a commitment. Also, Austen is witty, clever, and generally quite attractive. David Cecil describes her letters, writing, "The tone of Jane Austen's own letters is strikingly like that of the clever aristocratic lady letter-writers of her time . . . assured, amused, sharply observant of social nuance, and expressing itself in the same crisp ironic language" (Cecil 25). Known for her small features, round face, good complexion, olive skin, and curly, brown hair, Jane Austen is considered quite pretty (Cecil 66). Emma represents much of whom Austen is during her youth – a very clever and physically appealing woman who challenges the institutions of marriage and the traditional role of women.

As the heroine, Emma is redeemed by the end of the novel, as Knightley in particular guides her reformation. After they both recognize their love for one another and become engaged, they talk about Emma's earlier behavior. She thanks her mentor, stating, "I was very often influenced rightly by you – oftener than I would own at the time. I am very sure you did me good" (Austen, *Emma*, 445). It is appropriate that in a novel where the heroine must mature and develop to succeed, her mentor becomes her husband. *Emma* is about the growth of its title character, and Knightley helps to bring about that growth. He takes the place of her passive father and guides her when she loses focus.

This relationship reflects Austen's feelings about love as a union of minds and souls. In "Love and Pedagogy: Austen's Beatrice and Benedick," Juliet McMaster gives

Austen's definition of love. She quotes Lionel Trilling, writing, "Jane Austen 'was committed to the ideal of "intelligent love," according to which the deepest and truest relationship that can exist between human beings is pedagogic. This relationship consists in the giving and receiving of knowledge about right conduct, in the formation of one person's character by another, the acceptance of another's guidance in one's own growth'" (McMaster 39). Austen presents "love stories in which the heroine falls in love with a man who is her tutor, or her mentor, or her superior in age, experience, or authority" (McMaster 39). Knightley is all of these things to Emma. Bradbrook explains, "Mr. Knightley, whose age 'seven or eight-and-thirty,' is carefully noted, becomes, in certain respects, a substitute for the father who fails to provide his daughter with advice or congenial company" (Bradbrook 12). Knightley is older than Emma, with much more wisdom and experience, and he helps her character to develop in a positive way. His advice and his persistence in seeing her grow prove both his love for and his devotion to her. Because the novel focuses on the development of Emma's understanding of the world around her, Austen creates Knightley as a means of bringing about that change. Additionally, by presenting a member of the aristocracy as wise and worldly, Austen prevents her aristocratic audience from being offended. In this way, she can delicately make her point through Emma, while preserving her connection with her audience through her portrayal of Knightley.

Austen cements Emma's self-improvement when Emma returns to the subject that first proved her inadequacy: Harriet and Robert Martin. Knightley informs Emma that Martin has proposed to Harriet once again and that she has accepted him. On hearing such news, she asserts, "I am perfectly satisfied and most sincerely wish them happy"

(Austen, *Emma*, 455). She calls herself a fool for having previously discouraged the match and genuinely takes pleasure in Harriet's joyful marriage. She even thinks, "It would be a great pleasure to know Robert Martin" (Austen, *Emma*, 456). No longer the snob she once was, Emma looks forward to visiting the Abbey-Mill Farm, rather than believing it unfit for her presence. Her transformation is complete, and at least she fulfills the role of heroine adequately.

The choice to redeem Emma is particularly important to Austen's social commentary. Since Austen has not abandoned hope for the improvement of her own society, she envisions an England that embraces all people as equals. Were she to say that directly, she would jeopardize her position and popularity, possibly causing her to be ignored as a radical. Austen's decision to make Emma heroic through her recognition of the worth and character of Robert Martin allows Emma to overcome her own flaws and gradually view the world without conceit, serving as a fictional example for her social structure.

Emma is a particularly poignant characterization of Jane Austen. The wit, the beauty, even the likeable personality of Emma, all symbolize a connection between them. Austen can clearly relate to this character, whose faults make her real and whose development makes her heroic. Yet, the depiction is somewhat bittersweet because Emma's story ends in a marriage, while Austen's does not. By the time *Emma* is published, Austen's health is fading rapidly, and marriage is clearly not a possibility. Perhaps Austen ends *Emma* with a marriage in an attempt to reconcile herself with the tradition, recognizing that such an end for herself is impossible. Yet, it is more likely that she creates a character much like herself with a conclusion about which she has

ambivalent feelings. Though she may have dreamed of a lasting romance for herself, or for complete independence, on July 18, 1817, Jane Austen loses her life to Addison's Disease, and unlike her many heroines, dies a single woman limited because of her gender (Cecil 183).

CHAPTER 3

Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*

On April 21, 1816, Charlotte Brontë enters the world as the third daughter of Patrick and Maria Brontë. Arriving just a year before the death of Jane Austen, Brontë will soon represent the next generation of women writers. While Austen and Brontë may be viewed as contemporaries, both serving as female British writers of the nineteenth century, each has a very distinct and personal writing style. Unlike Austen, Brontë interjects a great deal of her personal life into her novels. Though Austen expresses her opinions and frustrations through her works, she opts not to use actual life events within them. Brontë, instead, depicts numerous incidents from her own life in her novels. Nevertheless, Brontë's novels far from serve as mere autobiographies, as she alters and manipulates life events into innovative and exciting pieces of fiction.

One such novel that both depicts events in the life of Charlotte Brontë and twists these events into creative bits of fiction is *Shirley*. Published in October of 1849, *Shirley* debuts on the cusp of the High Victorian Era. Richard Altick explains, "The fifties and sixties were boom times the like of which the nation had seldom known before; Great Britain found herself incomparably the richest nation on earth, the world's foremost banker, shipper, supplier of manufactured goods, and, through her navy, keeper of the peace in the mercantile sea lanes" (Altick 12). But, while the nation booms, literature remains focused on national societal structures, rather than international affairs. Altick explains, "The chief preoccupation of the major novelists, as it was a leading one of other prose writers, was the structure, internal movement, and moral atmosphere of contemporary society" (Altick 17). This holds true in *Shirley*, which though set in 1811,

upholds the High Victorianism present during the time of its publication, the mid-nineteenth century.

A particular area in which the novel's characters represent, or perhaps more appropriately satirize, the Victorian way of thinking is in the Victorians' view of marriage. In the second chapter of *Shirley*, Brontë discusses the controversy surrounding marriage through several male characters. Robert Moore, the local owner of the mill, explains that because of all the business that men must concern themselves with, there is simply no time for "such figments as love-making, &c" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 23). Malone, the opinionated curate of a neighboring town, responds,

> I go along with you completely, Moore. If there is one notion I hate more than another, it is that of marriage; I mean marriage in the vulgar weak sense, as a mere matter of sentiment; two beggarly fools agreeing to unite their indigence by some fantastic tie of feeling – humbug! But an advantageous connection, such as can be formed in consonance with dignity of views, and permanency of solid interests, is not so bad (Brontë, *Shirley*, 23-24).

By placing this conversation early in the novel, Brontë makes clear the disparaging view of marriage she has witnessed among those in her society. A few pages later, she further depicts this belief system, as Malone continues, "You are not under petticoat-government, like poor Sweeting; a man . . . destined to be ruled by women" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 26). Brontë confirms that the general population of men wants not only to marry for personal advantage, but also to guarantee power and control within the home.

Within a decade of the publication of *Shirley*, the role of the dutiful wife is clearly defined in Victorian society. According to the beliefs of Malone, men fear the domination of women within the home, preferring a wife who is the "Angel of the House." Coventry Patmore coins this term in a poem about married love, published

sometime between 1855 and 1856 (Auerbach 66). The poem reads, "the selfless paragon all women were exhorted to be,/enveloped in family life and seeking no identity beyond the roles of daughter, wife, and mother" (Auerbach 67-69). Nina Auerbach explains, "Angels were thought to be meekly self-sacrificial by nature: in this cautiously diluted form, they were pious emblems of a good woman's submergence in her family" (Auerbach 7). Following the tradition of women as tenders of the hearth, women are expected to represent all that is good and moral. Brontë recognizes this trend within families of her time and promotes equality among partners, rather than the domination of either sex.

Brontë continues her own commentary by giving Caroline Helstone's view of women's roles both in society and in marriage. Caroline continuously presents the opinions of Brontë, as Brontë weaves her autobiographical novel against the background of a patriarchal society. W.A. Craik explains, "Charlotte Brontë herself is the strongest personality in *Shirley*, and colours all the rest" (Craik 123). Through Caroline, Brontë has the opportunity to depict the conventions of her society and the ways in which she herself fits into it. One such topic is women and their dependence on marriage. Caroline expresses her frustration with the limited roles of single women. She states, "I believe single women should have more to do – better chances of interesting and profitable occupation that they possess now" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 390). She continues by discussing the many families of girls in her area,

> The brothers of these girls are every one in business or in professions; they have something to do: their sisters have no earthly employment, but household work and sewing; no earthly pleasure, but an unprofitable visiting; and no hope, in all their life to come, of anything better. This stagnant state of things makes them decline in health: they are never well;

> and their minds and views shrink to wondrous narrowness (Brontë, *Shirley*, 391).

Brontë can relate to the plight of such women, as an unmarried woman herself. Though offers of marriage are made to her several times, she refuses to make a loveless union for financial advantage as her character Malone suggests. Brontë watches the women around her suffer in their boredom and lack of purpose; she therefore rejects such a life by making a career for herself as an author.

Brontë continues Caroline's thoughts by addressing the problem that stems from the inactivity of women: their lives become consumed with finding a husband. Because they do not work, their families see them as financial burdens. Indeed many men need only take a wife for pecuniary gain, creating quite a desperate situation for women, as Brontë's heroine explains,

> The great wish – the sole aim of every one of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry: they will die as they now live. They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensnare husbands. The gentlemen turn them into ridicule: they don't want them; they hold them very cheap: they say – I have heard them say it with sneering laughs many a time – the matrimonial market is overstocked (Brontë, *Shirley*, 391).

For four pages, Brontë traces the thoughts of Caroline on such issues. It quickly becomes evident that Brontë is using her novel as a means of expressing her own personal frustrations about her society. She addresses her audience as "Men of England!" and implores them to alter the status of women (Brontë, *Shirley*, 392). As a single woman with two unmarried younger sisters, Brontë wishes that women had more options for fulfillment than marriage.

Through her own lifestyle, Brontë encourages discussion and questioning of Victorian values. While her novels express her own passionate exasperation with the

Victorian structures, she lives out her own vision, though at times confined by her sex. Rather than only presenting an idyllic setting in which women live successful lives independently of men, Brontë actually lives such a life for many years. Her novels reveal her zealous desire for equality, but her life is her true testament to the advancement of the plight of women. Although Brontë's characters are strong examples for female readers of the nineteenth century, Brontë herself is an even more effective role model, as she fervently struggles to maintain a life of resistance and during an age that values compliance.

Brontë's acknowledgment of the injustices of society is equally as evident in her publishing efforts. Three years before the publication of *Shirley*, she publishes a selection of her poetry, as well as the poetry of her sisters, Emily and Anne. She adopts the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, realizing that their works will reach a greater audience and ultimately greater success if they are thought to have been written by men. Though the poetry is widely ignored, the three sisters continue to use the pseudonyms for their more successful novels. The patriarchy and misogyny of the era is apparent, compelling the Brontë sisters to hide their identities in order to be recognized as intelligent and creative people.

While Brontë uses her characters to portray her own opinions, much in the style of Jane Austen, she also uses actual events from her life in her novels. An early example of this in *Shirley* is the Yorke family. Robert Bernard Martin explains, "The Yorke family . . . were drawn directly from life, the models being a Yorkshire manufacturer and his family with whom Miss Brontë was acquainted, and so closely do the Yorkes resemble their originals that many of the author's friends instantly recognized them under

their new names" (Martin 112). The Yorkes are based on the Taylor family. The meeting of Mary Taylor represents a time of great joy and learning in the life of Charlotte Brontë.

Brontë suffers many trials before meeting her new friend, Mary. At the age of five, Brontë witnesses the death of her mother to cancer (Gordon 17). By the time she is eight, her father decides to send her, her older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, and her younger sister, Emily, to the Cowan Bridge School for their studies. The students at Cowan are expected to live impoverished lives, as the school encouraged "resignation and humility" (Gordon 20). So affected by her time at Cowan, Brontë later recreates the horrors of this experience through her presentation of the Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*. The four girls suffer with hunger and bad health during their time at Cowan, which leads to the deaths of Brontë's two older sisters by consumption. Finally, Charlotte and Emily Brontë are allowed to leave and enjoy the peace of several years at home. They take pleasure in the company of their brother, Patrick Branwell, and youngest sister, Anne (Gordon 20-22). After six years of life at home, Charlotte Brontë enters the Roe Head School, lead by Miss Wooler. The Roe Head School is greatly influential for Brontë, and she quickly establishes herself as a true intellect. It is at Roe Head that she meets Mary Taylor, who immediately becomes her close friend. Though she does not enjoy the school routine and communal living, Brontë values her friendships and learning, hoping earnestly for the opportunity to one day have financial independence (Gordon 22-24).

In *Shirley*, Brontë chooses to depict her dear friend through the character of Rose Yorke. She describes Rose, writing, "Rose is a still, sometimes a stubborn girl now . . . and Rose has a mind full-set, thick sown with the germs of ideas her mother never knew.

It is agony to her often to have these ideas trampled on and repressed . . . so bright are the sparks of intelligence which, at moments, flash from her glance, and gleam in her language" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 148-149). Rose is outspoken and passionate as she states her frustration with the restrictions placed on women. She confidently informs her mother, "Better to try all things and find all empty, than to try nothing and leave your life a blank" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 400). When her mother responds that it is most important for a woman to do her duty, she answers, "Right, mother! And if my Master has given me ten talents, my duty is to trade with them, and make them ten talents more. Not in the dust of household drawers shall the coin be interred" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 400). It becomes clear that, as the voice of Rose Yorke, Mary Taylor – much like her close friend Charlotte – firmly believes that women should have a more important role in their society than that of simply housekeepers.

It is significant that Brontë chooses to capture this particular friend in her novel, because of Mary Taylor's devotion to what now could be termed feminism. Through the words of Rose Yorke, Brontë suggests that a woman has more to offer her society than a purely domestic role. Rose's allusion to the talents implies that a woman can only celebrate private, domestic successes and that therefore her actions cannot deeply impact the world around her. For her, the housekeeper's life is a dull and degrading one, marked by its monotony and its minimal gratification for the able mind of the woman. Brontë selects this friend to portray in her novel because Mary Taylor not only shares her own enthusiasm for change, but also stands as a respected member of society. Since Brontë recreates Mary Taylor in the role of a child, her views are recognized as the wisdom of the innocent, who can view the world untainted by experience.

Mary Taylor's sister, Martha, is also represented in *Shirley*, through the character of Rose's sister, Jessy. Felicia Gordon writes, "Charlotte was particularly struck by the pathos of Martha's burial in a foreign churchyard, an episode she later transcribed in the death of Jessy Yorke" (Gordon 35). Brontë describes the event, writing, "Stone crosses like these are not unfamiliar to you, nor are these dim garlands of everlasting flowers. Here is the place; green sod and a gray marble headstone – Jessy sleeps below. She lived through an April day; much loved was she, much loving . . . Her death was tranquil and happy in Rose's guardian arms" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 149). In her retelling of Martha Taylor's burial, Brontë's style justifies itself. It would be unfair to suggest that Brontë merely records her own life events in a dry, autobiographical manner. Instead, she breathes life into her characters by using what she knows and transforming it in a creative manner. Martha Taylor and Jessy Yorke are two distinct beings. Though Jessy is inspired by Brontë's experience with Martha, they are not the same people. Martha is a living person, while Jessy remains a symbol of pain, emotion, and imagination.

This style pervades the works of Brontë. The autobiographical elements in Brontë's works add truth and meaning to their novels, without removing the invention and effort of the author. She does not retell every event in her life, but instead selects particular occurrences that bear meaning for her; then, when she does depict them, she alters and twists them until they become a part of her fictional tales. In a life filled with disappointment and great sorrow, Brontë recognizes the value and power of her own experiences. This knowledge helps her to make her voice more authentic and authoritative as she weaves her own tortured reality into the poignant fiction that she invents.

Brontë not only recounts her own experiences in *Shirley*, but also stories that had once been told to her. Her father provides the inspiration for her vision of the riot at the novel's mill. "While minister of Hartshead, he had first-hand experience of the Luddite rebellion when, in1812, a group of rioters attacked Cartwright's Mill. This story, which he told his children many times, was transposed by Charlotte in her novel *Shirley*" (Gordon 17). This account serves as a source of great drama and intensity in *Shirley*. Brontë depicts the approaching rioters, writing, "The occupants of the dining-room listened too, and not merely now to the flow of the mill-stream: there was a nearer, though a muffled sound on the road below the churchyard; a measured beating, approaching sound; a dull tramp of marching feet" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 336). One can imagine Brontë recounting the exciting story that her father has impressed in her mind. Patrick Brontë is an unconventional father for his time; full of energy and enthusiasm, he fills his children's thoughts with political and social news. Though they do not have the same educational training as many of their peers, their knowledge of worldly events far surpasses that of their friends (Gordon 19). Although Patrick Brontë meets much criticism for his paternal role, biographers will make it clear that he cares deeply for his children, though his behavior may be at times unusual. Evidently he impacts his daughter, Charlotte, as his familiar story serves as material for her novel. Additionally, one may credit Patrick with having first planted in his daughter's mind the seeds of social commentary that pervade Brontë's novels.

Although Patrick Brontë's intentions in raising his children are virtuous, one might imagine that Charlotte's youth is challenging time. Eccentricities are not welcome in a rigid social structure, and his unconventional methods might weigh heavily on his

children. Additionally, growing up without a mother, Charlotte has no direct female role model. This could have both negative and positive results; though she has no one to affirm her femininity and help her manage her own poor self-image, she also has no one to emphasize the importance of the traditional female roles. Perhaps because she is raised by man – an unusual man at that – she feels the freedom to pursue her own desires, without risking the disappointment of a conventional mother.

In addition to her father, Brontë's relationship with another important man in her life surfaces in *Shirley*. The character of Macarthey, an Irish curate, depicts her father's curate, Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls (Gordon 55). Brontë describes Macarthey's strengths, writing, "he proved himself as decent, decorous, and conscientious . . . He laboured faithfully in the parish: the schools, both Sunday and day-schools, flourished under his sway like green bay-trees . . . he was sane and rational, diligent and charitable" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 634). But, Brontë also expresses the many weaknesses of the intolerant curate, noting,

> Being human, of course, he had his faults; these, however, were proper, steady-going, clerical faults; what many would call virtues: the circumstance of finding himself invited to tea with a Dissenter would unhinge him for a week; the spectacle of a Quaker wearing his hat in the church – the thought of an unbaptized fellow-creature being interred with Christian rites – these thing could make strange havoc in Mr. Macarthey's physical and mental economy (Brontë, *Shirley*, 634).

Though somewhat bigoted and rigid in his views, in *Shirley* Macarthey serves as the most admirable of curates who are generally mocked by Brontë. What Brontë does not realize while depicting Nicholls is that in December of 1852, after six years of living with the Brontë family, he will propose to Charlotte. This enrages her father, who expresses his anger with Nicholls, leaving him no choice but to abandon Haworth. Charlotte considers

her situation, as an aging woman with little financially or physically to attract a man, and implores her father to reconsider. She notes that once Patrick Brontë dies, she will be utterly alone. By 1854, Patrick's health starts to decline, and Charlotte and Nicholls begin meeting in secret. Through his illness, Patrick realizes just how valuable Nicholls will be, and he agrees to the marriage (Gordon 58). As in her depiction of Macarthey, Charlotte's feelings towards Nicholls are ambivalent. But, by 1854, "she had become convinced of his overwhelming loyalty, devotion, and moral worth" (Gordon 59). She surrenders her romantic notions of love for an appreciation of Nicholls' goodness and reliability. On June 29, 1854, the couple marries, though, sadly, Patrick refuses to give his only remaining daughter away moments before her wedding ceremony (Gordon 59).

Brontë's final decision to marry, particularly after noting her own age, unattractiveness, and poverty, illustrates her own fears about spinsterhood. Though she despises the ways in which the conventions of marriage limit women, she simply cannot escape them. Martin explains, "The spectre of spinsterhood that haunted Miss Brontë is personalized in the vignettes of Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, the old maids of the story, reacting in opposite ways to the loneliness of their lives" (Martin 134). Caroline Helstone discusses the women, stating, "But their houses are very dismal: they are both old maids. I am certain old maids are a very unhappy race" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 176). She describes Miss Ainley, saying, "she is always doing good . . . how charitable she is to the poor, as far as her means permit! Still nobody thinks much of her, or has pleasure in going to see her: and how gentlemen always sneer at her" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 176). Caroline witnesses the kind deeds of Miss Ainley, yet recognizes how lonely her life must be. While she admires this woman in many ways, Miss Ainley's lifestyle clearly

repulses Caroline. To be ignored and scorned, particularly while acting as a benevolent person, is terribly unappealing to the young woman.

Nevertheless, Miss Ainley's role is the more desirable of the two spinsters. Brontë describes the other, Miss Mann, writing, "she had passed alone through protracted scenes of suffering, exercised rigid self-denial, made large sacrifices of time, money, health for those who had repaid her only by ingratitude, and now her main – almost her sole – fault was, that she was censorious" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 179). This critical nature makes others avoid her, for her company can be abrasive and uncomfortable. Martin explains, "Miss Mann becomes increasingly withdrawn and censorious, aware of the lack of respect that society feels for her, and resentful of it" (Martin 134). But, when Caroline goes to her home to really listen to her and hear her plight, Miss Mann opens up to the young woman and tells her how she has suffered. Brontë writes, "Caroline, when she knew all, acknowledged that Miss Mann was rather to be admired for fortitude than blamed for moroseness" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 180). Caroline esteems Miss Mann once she understands the many trials of her life.

Caroline comes to appreciate both of the spinsters for their hard work and diligence throughout their single lives, yet she cannot accept such a life for herself. Brontë explains, "It is true, she still felt with pain that the life which made Miss Ainley happy could not make her happy: pure and active as it was, in her heart she deemed it deeply dreary because it was so loveless – to her ideas, so forlorn" (Brontë, *Shirley*, 183). Through this acknowledgement of her character, Brontë's own voice surfaces. After she rejects the proposal from Nicholls, Brontë realizes that she cannot be happy alone, after the approaching death of her father. A loveless life, however compassionate and

generous, will not satisfy her need for companionship. Therefore, while Brontë, like Caroline, does not condemn the life of the spinster, she simply cannot accept it for herself.

While Brontë does not realize as she writes *Shirley* that she will one day marry Nicholls, the novel does reflect many of her life events during that time. Perhaps the most influential aspect of her experiences is the death of her remaining siblings during the writing of *Shirley*. On September 24, 1848, her brother Branwell dies after years of debt, alcoholism, and alcohol-induced fits. For many years, he had brought shame to his family through his inability to maintain a successful career as he suffered with alcoholism. Though he creates many difficulties for his family, Branwell can perhaps be credited with providing Charlotte, Emily, and Anne with the impetus to develop careers of their own. As they witness their brother's many failures, they realize their responsibility to provide for themselves and their aging father. As a result, each of the three women develops her own career as a writer. Just three months after her brother's death, Emily dies from the consumption that she had developed at Branwell's funeral. A month later, doctors diagnose Anne with an incurable case of tuberculosis, from which she passes away in May of 1849 (Gordon 44-49). Gordon relates Charlotte's tragic situation, writing, "She found herself a single woman of 33, living in a remote Yorkshire parish with an ageing and grief-stricken father, to whose care she felt bound to attend, and deprived of her sisters who had given her solitary life its meaning" (Gordon 49). As Brontë copes with the heart-wrenching deaths of her three siblings, she devotes herself to *Shirley*. The novel is published in October of 1849, after a full year of personal anguish and intense loss.

Understandably, Brontë's environment affects the style and plot of her novel. Many biographers believe that the heroine, Caroline, is Brontë's depiction of her sister, Emily. Because Brontë concludes the novel just after Anne's death, it is further believed that the loving image of Caroline at the close of *Shirley* then represents Anne (Gordon 52). Whether this is true or not, Brontë cannot help but be influenced by her surroundings. Earl A. Knies notes, "Few novels have been composed under such unfavorable conditions as *Shirley* was . . . the first volume was written under the shadow of Branwell's increasing deterioration, the second at moments of troubled calm between one death and the next, and the third in a forced concentration designed to take Charlotte's mind away from thoughts of her dead sisters" (Knies 144). Brontë, however, incorporates her suffering into her novel. Martin gives two examples of the ways in which this occurs, writing, "When Caroline is apparently dying, Mrs. Pryor, usually so docile, changes from supplication to demand for her daughter's life. 'Till break of day she wrestled with God in earnest prayer' " (Martin 116). Brontë's own experience with approaching death suggests that she too knows the urgency of Mrs. Pryor's prayer. Martin continues,

> With obvious reference to the events of her own life, Miss Brontë begins the next chapter: 'Not always do those who dare such divine conflict prevail. Night after night the sweat of agony may burst dark on the forehead; the supplicant may cry for mercy with that soundless voice the soul utters when its appeal is to the Invisible. "Spare my beloved," it may implore' (Martin 116).

Again, Brontë knows such desperation very personally as she writes *Shirley*. While the loss of Branwell serves only as a source of sorrow for all that never was, the loss of her sisters tortures her with loneliness and grief. Having lost her two closest companions,

Emily and Anne, Brontë has no alternative but to mourn and bear witness to her tragic situation in her writing.

Brontë's resilience while losing her two beloved sisters shows the depth of her own unfailing courage. In her life she has known nothing but loss, yet she persists through her deepest sorrow. For Brontë, writing *Shirley* evolves almost into an entirely therapeutic event. With few friends and an eccentric father, Brontë does not have a strong base of support during her time of need. Instead, her work gives her a place to express the despair and suffering that she has deep within her. As Caroline Helstone represents Brontë's dying sisters, Brontë immortalizes the love that she has for them, rather than allowing it to gradually fade into a distant memory. Because she has this crucial outlet, she can go on as a person and as a writer. Many critics concur that *Shirley* is not a great literary success for its author. Still, *Shirley*, written during a most pain-filled part of her existence is an immense personal success for Brontë, giving meaning to her survival.

Despite Brontë's great trials while writing *Shirley*, she finishes her novel and presents it to the reading public. Although *Shirley* is not met with the same level of praise as *Jane Eyre*, published two years before, Brontë's works continue to receive critical acclaim. "The next five years were for Charlotte a time of literary success and public recognition" (Gordon 52). Painfully shy and prone to nervousness, Brontë struggles with her celebrity status, particularly when she is invited to meet the other famous men and women of her time. But, refusing to allow her trepidation to control her, she continues to produce literature, and it is in these last years of her life that she finds

fulfillment in the accomplishment of her last novel, *Villette*, as well as her brief marriage to Arthur Bell Nicholls.

CHAPTER 4

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

In 1851, at the age of 35, Charlotte Brontë begins to write what will be her last completed novel, *Villette*. Published in January of 1853, *Villette* proves to be a story with a great deal of personal value for Brontë; full of passion and pain, *Villette* is arguably her most autobiographical novel (Gordon 55).

In *Villette*, Brontë recounts many events of her past, particularly her time spent in Brussels. During the early 1840s, Brontë, along with her sisters Emily and Anne, seeks educational training to aid her in her attempt to start her own school in Haworth. As a result, Charlotte and Emily travel to Brussels with their father and another companion to learn at the school of M. and Madame Heger. The Hegers treat the sisters with great kindness and encouragement, and the experience proves to be quite important in the development of Charlotte's character. Both girls spend much time improving their writing, under the helpful guidance of M. Heger. Though the death of their aunt forces Emily to return home, Charlotte remains in Brussels to continue her studies, and it is during this time that Brontë's feelings for M. Heger become stronger and more intimate (Gordon 31-36).

Though Brontë gradually begins to recognize her own love for M. Heger, her strong sense of morality prevents her from expressing her feelings to the married man. The perceptive Madame Heger, however, realizes the thoughts of her pupil, and she quickly ends communication between her husband and Brontë. As a result, Brontë becomes very angry and resentful, writing M. Heger tortured love letters, while her intense loneliness and depression deepens (Gordon 36-37). This experience turns into

one of the most difficult periods of Brontë's life, as she learns the anguish of unrequited love.

In her creation of *Villette*, Brontë closely draws upon these years in Brussels, as, for example, in her depiction of M. Paul Emmanuel, who clearly represents M. Heger. As narrator Lucy Snowe begins work as an English teacher in the French town of Villette, she makes the acquaintance of another professor, M. Paul, who, though a harsh man, has a good heart that outweighs his abrasive manner. Lucy explains, "wilful, passionate, partial, as might be – he was the soul of honour, and might be trusted with a regiment of fairest and purest, in perfect security that under his leadership they would come to no harm" (Brontë, *Villette*, 135). Lucy immediately admires M. Paul, yet their relationship is one of great tumult, as they constantly argue with one another. Nevertheless, he repeatedly tries to repair their relationship by saying, "Come, we will not be rivals, we will be friends . . . We will be friends: do you agree" (Brontë, *Villette*, 148). It is clear that they each esteem one another, yet their distinct personalities and diverse ethnicities (Lucy's being English and M. Paul's being Belgian) cause them to argue frequently.

As time passes, in keeping with the autobiographical nature of the novel, Lucy's admiration for M. Paul slowly turns into love. She describes him as "a man whom it made happy to see others happy; he liked to have movement, animation, abundance and enjoyment round him" (Brontë, *Villette*, 366). When M. Paul asks how she would feel should he leave Villette for some years, she responds, "I hid my face with the book, for it was covered with tears. I asked him why he talked so; and he said he would talk so no more, and cheered me again with the kindest encouragement. Still, the gentleness with

which he treated me during the rest of the day, went somehow to my heart" (Brontë, *Villette*, 368). When Lucy witnesses his affection for another young woman, she mistakenly believes him to be in love with her. She writes, "I think I never felt jealousy till now" and goes on to describe the faithful and passionate love she has recently developed for M. Paul (Brontë, *Villette*, 449).

The intensity of Brontë's description of Lucy's love for M. Paul comes from her obsessive feelings for M. Heger. Brontë is no stranger to jealousy, as she watches the object of her affection live in union with his wife, unable to show his student any reciprocation of love. Lucy's situation is additionally similar to Brontë's because she learns the pain of having someone attempt to break up her romance. Much like Madame Heger, *Villette*'s Madame Beck serves as an impediment in the relationship between Lucy and M. Paul. As the mistress of the school in which Lucy and M. Paul teach, Madame Beck keeps a watchful eye on everything that occurs. Lucy explains, "As Madame Beck ruled by espionage, she of course had her staff of spies" (Brontë, *Villette*, 68). Madame Beck regularly spies on her staff and pupils, even going so far as to look through their personal things. Nevertheless, Lucy initially admires her employer, much as Brontë admires Madame Heger. Even as Lucy watches Madame Beck secretly examine Lucy's toilet, she respects her employer's skilful work of surveillance. Lucy explains,

> Open stood the lid of the work-box, open the top drawer; duly and impartially was each succeeding drawer opened in turn: not an article of their contents but was lifted and unfolded, not a paper but glanced over, not a little box but was unlidded; and beautiful was the adroitness, exemplary the care with which the search was accomplished . . . I stood, in short, fascinated (Brontë, *Villette*, 111).

Lucy later expresses her gratitude to Madame Beck, who, she states, "had never from the first treated me otherwise than with respect" (Brontë 280). Lucy appreciates the opportunities that her employer has offered her, particularly as a foreigner with no references or experience.

Likewise, Brontë's relationship with Madame Heger begins as one of mutual respect and admiration. When she meets Madame Heger, she is struck by her amiable nature, and Brontë appreciates the regular encouragement she receives from Madame Heger. But, as Brontë's feelings for M. Heger become apparent to his wife, the relationship between the two women deteriorates.

Brontë similarly depicts this in Lucy's experience with Madame Beck. As Lucy's relationship with M. Paul intensifies, Madame Beck tries to manipulate and terminate their feelings for one another. She attempts to discourage Lucy's feelings for M. Paul, saying, "if he wanted to marry ever so much – soit moi, soit une autre – he could not do it; he has too large a family already on his hands" (Brontë, *Villette*, 380). When M. Paul must leave Villette to continue his duty in Basseterre, Madame Beck endeavors to prevent Lucy from speaking with him. As Lucy goes to bid him farewell, she explains, "Madame was before me; she had stepped out suddenly; she seemed to magnify her proportions and amplify her drapery; she eclipsed me; I was hid . . . Madame had her will; yes, she got him away, and he had not seem me; he thought me absent" (Brontë, *Villette*, 426). As Lucy later waits for him, Madame Beck finally calls out, "You must not marry Paul. He cannot marry" (Brontë, *Villette*, 429). Lucy responds to Madame Beck's desperate command, crying out, "Dog in the manger," writing, "for I knew she secretly wanted him, and had always wanted him . . . she wanted to marry, that she might

bind him to her interest" (Brontë, *Villette*, 429). Brontë's depiction of Madame Beck changes from the portrayal of a wise and effective mentor to the image of a scheming and self-serving woman, paralleling her personal experience with Madame Heger.

While Brontë's anguish in being separated from her love is comprehensible, her interpretation of Madame Heger in the character of Madame Beck is perhaps somewhat unfair. Though Madame Beck attempts to end the relationship between Lucy and M. Paul purely out of her own jealousy and selfish desire, Madame Heger has an actual claim to M. Heger as his wife. It is quite natural for Madame Heger to want to preserve her own marriage, and, accordingly, remove the temptation that is present in her home. Therefore, while Brontë may not agree with Madame Heger's methods of maintaining her marriage, Madame Heger does not play the same role as the scheming Madame Beck. This depiction clearly points to Brontë's use of her novel to find a means of catharsis. She takes her own anger for Madame Heger, which is firmly rooted in jealousy, and depicts her as a callous, calculating woman. While the image may not be particularly just, it helps Brontë to manage the sorrow and rage confined within her.

Interestingly, *Villette* differs from Brontë's own life in the ultimate union of Lucy and M. Paul. Earl A. Knies writes,

> *Villette* is at once the most and the least autobiographical of Charlotte's novels: almost every event in the book grows directly out of some personal experience, and yet situations are so recombined and arranged, so transmitted by their fictional context, that in working out their own logic they cease to be autobiographical and enter the realm of art (Knies 171).

This is particularly true in the romance of Lucy and M. Paul. Just before leaving Villette, M. Paul says to Lucy, "Lucy, take my love. One day share my life. Be my dearest, first on earth" (Brontë, *Villette*, 470). With these words, Lucy is able to hear all that Brontë

has ever hoped to hear from M. Heger. Brontë deviates from her life in order to make the dream come true, perhaps in her own sort of fictional attempt at satisfaction. Knies writes, "Finally, Lucy falls in love with M. Paul, as Charlotte supposedly had done with M. Heger, and, one might say, as a sort of wish-fulfillment Charlotte makes M. Paul reciprocate the love" (Knies 24). Lucy is able to achieve the acceptance and response that Brontë cannot.

As an unsatisfied and single woman, such wish fulfillment is especially important to Brontë. As she ages, she does not see marriage in her future, but she refuses to give her heroine the same lonely fate. Through Lucy, Brontë continues to develop her cathartic experience after her years in Brussels. By demonizing Madame Beck and having Lucy prevail with M. Paul, Brontë finds the ultimate success that she could not grasp in her own life. This shows both the fantasy that still remains in her mind and her alliance with Lucy, to whom she remains faithful by fulfilling her character's need to be loved. Brontë's bond with her character reflects her loyalty to herself; even though Brontë often suffers in her own life, her resilience forces her to move forward. By constantly progressing, as a writer and as a woman, she refuses to submit to her grief. For Brontë, one way to such progression is by releasing her pent-up angst through her writing and allowing her characters to celebrate the triumphs that she herself could not achieve.

Brontë's painful relationship with M. Heger is not the only real-life romance historians believe that she recreates in *Villette*. Throughout the novel, it is evident that Lucy is naturally drawn to Dr. John, who soon proves to be the Graham Bretton from her youth. Graham repeatedly saves Lucy when she is frightened or in harm, such as when

she arrives in France and when she develops a nervous fever. But Lucy's attachment to him is most obvious in her treatment of his letters. When she first receives a letter from Graham, she narrates, "I experienced a happy feeling – a glad emotion which went warm to my heart, and ran lively through all my veins. For once a hope was realized. I held in my hand a morsel of real solid joy: not a dream, not an image of the brain, not one of those shadowy chances imagination pictures, and on which humanity starves but cannot live" (Brontë, *Villette*, 229). Lucy is overwhelmed with pure bliss at the knowledge that her friend has taken the time to write to her. Graham has been a source of comfort and constant aid to her; when she later cannot find the letter from him, she is completely distraught. She explains, "He asked me, smiling, why I cared for his letter so very much. I thought, but did not say, that I prized it like the blood in my veins. I only answered that I had so few letters to care for" (Brontë, *Villette*, 237). Though she would never admit it to Graham, Lucy adores him above all men. Particularly during the time when her relationship with M. Paul is tumultuous and unreliable, Graham serves as her only male source of consistency and support.

Additionally, Lucy feels a great deal of loyalty to Graham's mother, Mrs. Bretton. After enjoying extended visits twice a year with her godmother as a child, Lucy develops a childlike adoration for Mrs. Bretton. When taken with a nervous fever, she is delighted to find herself once again in Mrs. Bretton's home. Lucy relates her feelings about her godmother's care, noting,

> Food or drink never pleased me so well as when it came through her hands. I do not remember the occasion when her entrance into a room had not made that room cheerier . . . My godmother's lively black eye and clear brunette cheek, her warm prompt hand, her self-reliant mood, her decided bearing, were all beneficial to me as the atmosphere of some salubrious climate (Brontë, *Villette*, 171-172).

Her love for both Graham and Mrs. Bretton are marked with longing, because she knows she can never be a part of their family. Graham is desperately in love with Ginevra Fanshawe, and Mrs. Bretton is not her true mother. On staying with them, she reminds herself,

> Do not let me think of them too often, too much, too fondly: let me be content with a temperate draught of this living stream: let me not run athirst, and apply passionately to its welcome waters: let me now imagine in them a sweeter taste than the earth's fountains know. Oh! would to God! I may be enabled to feel enough sustained by an occasional, amicable intercourse, rare, brief, unengrossing and tranquil: quite tranquil (Brontë, *Villette*, 170).

It is evident that the Brettons offer Lucy the acceptance and affection for which she has always yearned.

In Brontë's depiction of Lucy's adulation of the Brettons, historians believe that she recreates her own relationship with her publisher, George Smith, and his mother. Knies writes, "Doctor John and his mother are apparently modeled upon Charlotte's publisher, George Smith, and his mother. The trip to the opera, to see Vashti, and other incidents had their basis in actual experiences during Charlotte's visits in London" (Knies 24-25). Having lost her mother at the age of five and experiencing a life without any romantic relationships, Brontë has a void in her life that the Smiths partially fill. Brontë has always known a longing for maternal care and has more recently felt the loss of sisterly companionship as well. There is no one person in her life to whom she can confidently look for unconditional love and support, and the Smiths represent for her the family for which she hungers. But, as Lucy Snowe recognizes in her own situation with the Brettons, Brontë knows that she cannot depend on a family with whom her contact is so limited and loosely established. The Smiths cannot fill the void in Brontë's life

because they could never offer her the level of love and intimacy that she so desperately desires. Nevertheless, Brontë's depiction of the Brettons is a warm and passionate tribute to her love for the Smiths.

Brontë's trip to Brussels is represented not only in the romances of Lucy Snowe, but also in her account of Lucy's visit to a Catholic priest. When anxious and upset in her loneliness, Lucy decides to step inside a confessional. When the priest, Père Silas, asks her why, as a Protestant, she has entered a Catholic confessional, she explains, "I said, I was perishing for a word of advice or an accent of comfort. I had been living for some weeks quite alone; I had been ill; I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight" (Brontë, *Villette,* 153). The priest informs Lucy that the Lord has drawn her to the church to return her to the true faith, and he asks her to visit him at his home for counsel. Though Lucy does not agree with his analysis, she notes, "There was something of Fénélon about that benign old priest; and whatever most of his brethren may be, and whatever I may think of his Church and creed (and I like neither), of himself I must ever retain a grateful recollection. He was kind when I needed kindness; he did me good. May Heaven bless him" (Brontë, *Villette,* 155).

Lucy's curious experience with the priest reflects a similar occurrence in the life of Brontë. In September of 1843, Brontë recounts the peculiar event in a letter to her sister:

> A little wooden door inside the grating opened, and I saw the priest leaning his ear towards me. I was obliged to begin . . . I commenced with saying I was a foreigner and had been brought up a Protestant . . . but I was determined to confess, and at last he said he would allow me because it might be the first step towards returning to the true church. I actually did confess – a real confession. When I had done he told me his address, and said that every morning I was to go to the rue de Parc – to his house – and he would reason with me and try to convince me of the error and

> enormity of being a Protestant!!! I promised faithfully to go. Of course, however, the adventure stops there, and I hope I shall never see the priest again (Martin 161).

As a staunch Protestant, Brontë does not embrace the faith and persuasion of the Catholic priest, yet she appreciates his time and thoughtfulness. Excepting only that Père Silas does again appear in Lucy's life, unlike Brontë's priest, their confessional stories are practically identical. In her anguish, Brontë turns to the guidance of a priest, though her true beliefs are extremely anti-Papist and firmly Protestant; this choice depicts Brontë's desperation at the time. She constantly searches for answers to her questions regarding society, religion, and her own happiness, and she earnestly hopes for enlightenment from a man whose belief system she does not even share. Lucy's experience mirrors Brontë's eager attempts at mental clarification, as she too searches for freedom from her inner turmoil.

Not only does Brontë have Lucy Snowe undergo much that she herself lives through, she creates an obvious connection between her own and her character's appearance and temperament. Like her siblings, Brontë suffers from intense shyness, which limits her communication with the world outside her family. Her friends beyond her sisters are kept few due to her inability to approach people with confidence and self-assurance. Lucy is also painfully shy, which is particularly obvious in her experience with the school play. When M. Paul demands that she perform in the school play, she is terrified. She states, "Perfectly secure from human audience, I acted my part" (Brontë, *Villette*, 128). But, when M. Paul appears to listen to her performance, she notes, "Again I went through the part, but not half so well as I had spoken it alone" (Brontë, *Villette*, 128). When she finally acts her part, she explains, "That first speech was the difficulty; it

revealed to me this fact, that it was not the crowd I feared, so much as my own voice" (Brontë, *Villette*, 132). Fortunately, though Brontë has many of the same fears as her character, she is less afraid of her own voice when it is put into writing under the guise of the voice of another. While her speech is often hampered by her own insecurities, writing offers Brontë an outlet for the many important and profound thoughts that she does have.

The timidity of Brontë is accompanied by a great deal of nervousness and anxiety, possibly as a result of her massive insecurities, so Lucy is accordingly plagued by nervous disorders. During a school vacation, when Lucy is nearly alone in the school, her anxiety displays itself in physical illness. She explains, "At last a day and night of peculiarly agonizing depression were succeeded by physical illness. I took perforce to my bed . . . and for nine dark and wet days, of which the Hours rushed on all turbulent, deaf, disheveled . . . I lay in a strange fever of the nerves and blood" (Brontë, *Villette*, 151). After Lucy meets with Père Silas, her nerves trouble her so much that she loses consciousness and develops a dangerous fever. She notes, "I did not know what my ailment had been, but that I had certainly suffered a good deal, especially in mind" (Brontë 172). Like her author, Lucy's greatest physical weaknesses begin with problems of the mind. While writing *Villette*, Brontë is continually interrupted by serious bouts of depression and resulting physical illnesses. Her intense struggles with grief, poor self-image, and isolation plague her as she writes her last novel, and Brontë is often immobilized by the ensuing illnesses. Yet, her courage throughout her life makes these interruptions temporary, and, like Lucy, she refuses to allow her anxiety to control and destroy her life.

A trait that may make both Brontë, as well as her character, more inhibited is the unattractive appearance that they share. Brontë's publisher, George Smith, describes her as "very small . . . her head seemed too large for her body . . . her face was marred by the shape of her mouth and by the complexion. There was little feminine charm about her; and of this fact she herself was uneasily and perpetually conscious" (Gordon 43). Similarly, Lucy is very aware of her homely looks. Knies writes, "She feels further isolation because of her plain appearance, of which she is painfully aware. At least twice she stands before a mirror beside more attractive people and cannot fail to perceive what she calls her 'outward difficulty' " (Knies 186). This first occurs in her youth; when accompanied by Miss Marchmont, for whom she is a companion, Lucy narrates, "I saw myself in the glass, in my mourning-dress, a faded, hollow-eyed vision. Yet I thought little of the wan spectacle. The blight, I believed, was chiefly external" (Brontë, *Villette*, 33). Having little experience with peers or romance, Lucy is relatively unaffected by her unsightly appearance. Years later while teaching in Villette, her student, Ginevra Fanshawe, looks into a mirror with Lucy beside her. Lucy explains, "She turned me and herself round; she viewed us both on all sides; she smiled, she waved her curls, she retouched her sash, she spread her dress, and finally, letting go my arm, and curtseying with mock respect, she said: 'I would not be you for a kingdom' " (Brontë, *Villette*, 137). Ginevra continues harshly, "you can't call yourself young at twenty-three; you have no attractive accomplishments – no beauty. As to admirers, you hardly know what they are; you can't even talk on the subject" (Brontë, *Villette*, 137). Though Lucy appears unaffected by the comments of a vain and foolish girl, her loneliness and isolation become a repeated theme in the novel. Clearly, Lucy's own unattractiveness and

overwhelming difficulties with communication create a barrier between herself and other people.

Similarly, harsh judgment of her own appearance may be a factor in Brontë's choice to communicate through writing. Through her novels, it becomes apparent that Brontë has a variety of passionate opinions and emotions on an assortment of different topics, yet she can only articulate them through her artistic vision. If she were to view herself as beautiful, perhaps she would feel more accepted and more comfortable to speak out in her daily life. Sadly, because she self-consciously recognizes her own plain looks, as she so clearly indicates in her creation of Lucy, she can only give herself a voice under the more anonymous identity of a character produced by Currer Bell.

As *Villette* comes to a close, Lucy overcomes her timidity and insecurities to accept and reciprocate the love of M. Paul. Yet, Brontë does not end the novel with the success of their romance. As Lucy anxiously awaits the return of M. Paul, she is met only with a powerful and destructive storm. She then closes her narrative, choosing not to upset her reader. She explains, "Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life" (Brontë, *Villette*, 474). By expressing that she does not want to "trouble" any "quiet, kind heart," Lucy implies that the truth would indeed distress the reader. Brontë makes it clear that M. Paul has lost his life in travel and that Lucy will never live the life of love and companionship that she had finally been promised. At this point in her life, Brontë thinks that she too will die alone, unfulfilled and hopeless.

Though her character has known the fulfillment of love that she has thus far been denied, to leave Lucy content would be too idealistic, too far a deviation from what Brontë considers the reality of the world. Once again, her character represents her own pain and experience.

Had Brontë known the love that she would soon experience with Arthur Bell Nicholls, perhaps Lucy's fate would have been a more satisfying one. Regardless, Brontë marries a year and a half after the publication of *Villette*. Her marriage is filled with joy, humor, and true friendship. But just seventeen months after the wedding ceremony, Brontë is struck with what seems only a bad cold. Its results are devastating, however, and on March 31, 1855, just four months after falling ill, Charlotte Brontë dies of tuberculosis. At the age of 39, she leaves behind a new husband and an aging father, who has watched his wife and six children pass away. As both a tribute to his daughter, and in order to quell the rumors circulating about her, Patrick Brontë commissions Elizabeth Gaskell, author and friend of Charlotte, to write her biography. To this day Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*serves as an important window into the tortured and productive life of one of the great writers of the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

Through their novels, Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë were able to give a voice and a history to the many nineteenth-century English women whose identities went unnoticed and unappreciated. In a century dominated by patriarchal structures that intentionally subjugated women, women lacked power, particularly power of speech. As a result, their struggles, their ideas, and their wisdom could not be expressed, leaving women in a position of frustration and silence. Austen and Brontë had the courage to articulate the plight of women through their important female characters, whose trials and insights helped combat the inadequacies and injustices of their age. Through such characters, women found their voices in a fundamental step towards equality.

For Austen and Brontë, the process of writing was not only an endeavor to improve their societies, but also a liberating way of conveying their own experiences. By using a variety of autobiographical elements – both social commentary and personal life events – within their novels, Austen and Brontë were able to explore and portray their greatest desires, sorrows, and frustrations in a world that did not always welcome their opinions. They could redirect all of the thoughts and emotions that they were expected to conceal and sublimate into the very characters that they created. Additionally, Austen and Brontë could endow their characters with traditional and nontraditional means of success and happiness that they themselves often found elusive. Consequently, their writing became a cathartic experience, as they found peace and satisfaction through the successful and fulfilling lives of their female characters, triumphant over the injustices of society and fate.

Though these writers endowed their characters with the contentment and gratification they were unable to attain, they also burdened them with aspects of personal sorrow that had accompanied their own life experiences. Their characters suffered through the restrictive conventions of gender and class and the bittersweet demands of marriage, as well as the cruelties of ill-fated love. It is through theses afflictions that the characters of Austen and Brontë represented the many obstacles facing women in the nineteenth century. As the writers grappled with the same issues, they reflected their own disappointments in those of their characters, which resulted in authentic representations of the female experience. As the starkness of the lives of Austen and Brontë was enriched by their writing, their novels were equally enriched by their portraits of desperation for understanding and acceptance. By writing, these women found solace and a sense of purpose, subsequently offering consolation to the many women who struggled in similar positions.

Not only did Austen and Brontë illustrate the paradox of women in their traditional roles, but they also inspired women to have the courage to surpass conventions. Through their strong characters and their own alternative lifestyles, these authors maintained that women could go beyond the role of the subservient wife and young mother. As role models, they provided a tremendous service to women of their time by encouraging them to break out of the mold that both shaped and stifled them in order to expand their visions and goals. Through Austen and Brontë's characters, the strong and resilient woman emerged triumphant over the meek and sacrificial angel, reminding women of how much they were capable of achieving.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf discusses the magnitude of the challenge that nineteenth-century English women faced as authors. Firstly, they were pioneers in writing, as the general population had consistently discouraged female vocations beyond the domestic sphere. She notes, "there was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually" (Woolf 54). As a result, "they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help" (Woolf 76). Women such as Austen and Brontë convincingly established female presence in literature. Secondly, once these women took such steps as forerunners in feminine prose, Woolf explains the ensuing difficulties,

> It is fairly evident that even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist. On the contrary, she was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted. Her mind must have been strained and her vitality lowered by the need of opposing this, of disproving that. For here again we come within range of that very interesting and obscure masculine complex which has had so much influence upon the woman's movement; that deep-seated desire, not so much that *she* shall be inferior as that *he* shall be superior (Woolf 55).

Nineteenth-century women quickly threatened the male academic world, which did not welcome the competition. Novelists such as Austen and Brontë created complex, multi-dimensional characters and pondered significant issues present in their world; male intellectuals could not discredit their novels easily. Because of the rejection they often faced as women, it was indeed courageous of these women to continue on in their challenging endeavor.

In spite of their determination, Austen and Brontë still felt the limiting effects of their era. Modern-day women authors cover a wide range of styles and genres, unlike the nineteenth-century women authors who focused upon the novel. Woolf explains this phenomenon, stating,

> Then, again, all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. People's feelings were impressed on her; personal relations were always before her eyes. Therefore, when the middle-class woman took to writing, she naturally wrote novels (Woolf 67).

Novels were an accessible form of expression during this time because of the severe restrictions imposed on women. As women have gradually entered all realms of the public sphere, their inclusion in a variety of genres reflects a more liberated experience.

Not only were Austen and Brontë restricted by their environment, they were also oppressed by the anonymity suffered by other women around them. Woolf explains, "It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century. Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man . . . Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them" (Woolf 50). Though it is evident that Brontë wanted a voice, as demonstrated through her chosen profession, she still grappled with the weight that her society placed on female obscurity. Even though she overcame her anxiety through publication and gradual recognition, she could not entirely escape the tradition surrounding her. Fortunately, her determination to be and say more than what was expected grew more powerful than her wish to adhere to custom.

For Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, writing became a widely beneficial undertaking. Through their creative genius, they had the opportunity to satisfy their own needs, while inspiring other women. Together, they laid the foundation for a rich history of female writers, and they offered many future generations insight into their era through

enthralling literature. Through the autobiographical elements within their female characters, Austen and Brontë were able to give their works the authenticity and meaning that has earned them recognition as some of the great novels of English literature. The achievements of these two young, inexperienced, middle-class women were enormous milestones in the enduring battle for female equality.

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